

*I Spy* (7Apr19) Luke 18:31-19:10

Let's look at three modes of practicing our faith, or versions of following Jesus.

The first simply looks at Jesus himself in the first part of this reading. In these weeks of Lent, we've heard that his face is set toward Jerusalem, and now he's close. At Jericho, near the Dead Sea, it's a climb from 850 feet below sea level up the desert mountains to Jerusalem 2500 feet above sea level. Jesus is almost there, with apparently full awareness of what he's walking into. He says again today he's expecting to be hurt by this, to be betrayed, insulted, and even to give up his life.

This is the big self-sacrifice sort of thing, and some people envision that exactly as what it means to be faithful, that it means being like Jesus, being willing to take any risk and confront danger and go against the grain and not do what's easy, but really to stand up for what you believe in, putting life and limb on the line. That it's in some way giving yourself up for others.

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I wouldn't say Jesus is looking to be flattered, but maybe we'd still identify this as praise, recognizing the validity and value of his way and striving to be a disciple in this quintessential form, of doing like Jesus. Indeed, it's become so much the epitome example that we may even presume simply that that's what it is to be a Christian, that you're supposed to give up your wellbeing, your time and resources, your identity, to give up your life. It's a high standard of expectations!

And if that's what you imagine for practicing this faith and following Jesus, to do just what he does, and be like him, then you're not exactly in line with the followers story, since those around Jesus didn't have a clue what he was talking about. They're physically following along, but don't expect or understand that it should be like this at all!

So we move to the next version or mode of faith with the next person in the story. We get a blind beggar. This model is not the charging into danger version, not the one who forsakes security

in order to encounter risk, but the one whose life is already at risk, already in trouble, already dealing with dangerous circumstances, for his own sake, who needs relief, some escape, some help, something other than his current state.

These are also apparent moments in our lives, when we are desperate and scared and searching. I occasionally have friends who never usually come show up at church after an accident or some sort of trauma, when the bottom seems to be falling out of life. It's when I get phone calls as a pastor or people stopping into my office, as well. Faith (and maybe the church) can be a ready answer when there feels nowhere left to turn, no forthcoming answers, when you've exhausted possibility and you are exhausted.

For the vision-impaired person in the Bible reading, it wasn't just an acute health crisis but also meant a breakdown in relationships as he was excluded from social circles and then the further struggle of financial strain. We can relate to the variety of those overlapping difficulties, when relationships break apart, when the assistance we need is falling short, when we're worried about how the bills will come together, when our bodies won't cooperate to be what we wish, when it is just plain hard to function in life.

The blind man cried out "Have mercy on me!" I don't know that that means he's thinking his blindness is caused by sin, but our minds do often go there, wondering what we did to deserve our dire situations, if we're being punished, if it could've been avoided.

Maybe the cry for mercy is just a yearning to be seen, to be noticed, to be included. The blind beggar—even before a question of regaining sight himself, of being able to see Jesus—is most eagerly hoping to be seen *by* Jesus, that when no one else cares or will help or pay attention, Jesus might. And Jesus does, indeed, see him and hear him and respond to him. Jesus declares him saved, well, reintegrated into society, no longer marginalized.

So he follows Jesus. We could picture him walking along with Jesus, from the outskirts of town back into a place among others.

But, of course, we also take the praising God and following Jesus as a necessary degree of response, another of the “shoulds” and “oughts” of faith. He had cried out in his desperation and longing, needing something different, hoping for something more. And he was heard and seen and seeing. So we presume he should be grateful, ought to respond with respective dedication, that it is indeed right—and maybe even a duty—for him to give thanks and praise, that his life should be changed, that he is supposed to recognize the change and live differently.

With that perspective or tendency, though, I want to point us to the third version, the third mode of faith. That’s Zacchaeus. And in our non-desperate moments, aside from emergencies or low times of depression, when life is just plugging along, his mode may have the most consistent fit for us.

Some versions of the Bible translate his lines to Jesus as “I *will* pay back” in the future tense, making it a response and change because of the love and grace Jesus has shown him. Certainly I hope that things can sometimes operate that way for us, that we are better people because we’ve been to church, that you are more loving and caring because you’ve been loved by Jesus, that your faith gives you confidence to act boldly.

But we should recognize that that’s partly a show we like to put on, wanting to seem good.

In that way, if we’re honest, we could name churches after this guy: St. Zacchaeus Lutheran Church. He’s our patron. See, when he talks about reimbursing those he has harmed, it’s actually pretty minimal, maybe some showboating PR, and not much change. It’s about like a politician saying, Well I always drive the speed limit, or a student asserting, But I never cheat on the *final* exam! It’s not actually a very convincing display of uprightness. In that society, any wealth he had at all would’ve been seen as an injustice, as coming by it dishonestly. It was always a zero-sum game and so if he was rich, it meant it was at the expense of others in his community, which is why they had good reason to look down on him and disparage him.

But Zacchaeus doesn’t show much remorse, doesn’t offer to liquidate his assets. They might’ve wished his encounter with Jesus could’ve even led him to renounce his career and take up a different line of work, or become a permanent follower of Jesus. He’s sure not taking on the empire or taking up his cross. Instead, our translation today highlights a show of self-justification, our claims to be trying hard even while continuing mostly in our old patterns. Zacchaeus says he was already at least minimally good, and wanted that to be enough.

We, too, cling to our claims that we’re good enough. We contribute to charitable causes. Even for a few bucks, we figure our support is saving the world in some small way. Or we watch our mouths on occasion, so that must count for something. Or we at least haven’t murdered anybody today. Or we *want* to be good. Pretty minimal standards.

Now, Jesus could’ve warned Zacchaeus that he was bound for hell if he didn’t do better, that he should sell all he had and give the money to the poor, could’ve said that the requirements were bigger and Zacchaeus was really supposed to live up to all of that. Instead, Jesus just says he’s hungry and coming over for supper.

We could say Zacchaeus was trying both physically and spiritually to climb up to see Jesus, but yet again what matters is that Jesus saw him. So it wasn’t what he had done right or what he promised to do right in the future. Jesus was there for him as he was, loving him as a child of God, identifying him as a member of the beloved community.

Our Savior Jesus calls it a game of hide and seek, but we insist on playing it backward. We think we need to go on the hunt for Jesus, to track him down, to see him, to do something special to be on the right path.

But he is the one who comes to find the lost, to seek you out wherever you are, whether you feel lost or wondering if you’re hidden or are far from him or imagine yourself right behind him. He sees you. He spies with his little eye. He finds you when you’re desperate. He finds you when

you think you're doing pretty well and when you should be doing better. He finds you when nobody else wants to. He finds you even by climbing up to Jerusalem and facing the fiercest powers and searching through the depths of death for you, losing himself to find you.

He'll find you right here in this room this morning, and he'll find you in all those rooms you'll be in this week—bedrooms and boardrooms and bathrooms and classrooms and waiting rooms and more wherever you roam. Whether you're looking for him or not, he has come to find you, to save you, to let you know you are not lost.

Ready or not, here he comes.